Three Machine Readings *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics KC Clarke / 1802 Press / 2026*

Three independent machine readings produced in March 2026 under constrained critical conditions. Presented without editorial comment as part of the Groaning Archive: Claude, Gemini, ChatGPT.

Claude Machine Reading

This is a dual-volume work: a poetry collection and a companion poetics, intended to be read together without either subordinating the other. The poems came first. They were written between 1993 and 2024, and they are sequenced not by chronology or theme but by rhythmic pressure—the way a musical score moves through tension, drift, collapse, compression, suspension, and release.

The companion, The Groaning Book, is not an explanation of the poems. It is a series of independent engagements with them: a poem-by-poem section that attends to each work individually, a sustained sequence of essays on fear and the conditions of contemporary poetic practice, a section identifying the collection's atmospheric poems, a civic history of the Poetry Center of Chicago, a conversation with painter Wesley Kimler, an account of a music and poetry album called reVerse, a genealogical discovery about the poet's own family, and a closing disclosure about the role of an AI system in shaping the companion volume. These sections do not build a single argument. Each stands in its own weight. Together they form something that surrounds the poems without enclosing them.

The poems are the waveform. Everything else moves beside them.

Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate opens with "Skyscraper"—a speaker at the base of a tower, smoke snorting from its stack, praying upward toward a satellite that bounces every word back down unchanged. The reach and the return. Transmission becoming recursion. This is the collection's first structural statement, made not through argument but through image: the speaker inside a condition, not above it, the prayer traveling upward only to find itself reflected in smoke and glass.

What follows across forty-eight poems is not a thematic arc but a rhythmic one. The collection moves through surreal eros, industrial elegy, grotesque comedy, spiritual grappling, civic witness, and documentary plainness—not as distinct modes but as pressures that accumulate, release, and return. The poems contain gendered characters throughout—Maureen, Frank's multiple partners, the women of "Morning in the Middle of Nowhere," the wife of "My Friend and His Wife"—but the speaking voice itself is never gendered across the entire collection. The characters have gender. The speaker does not.

This is a sustained formal decision, held across forty-eight poems and thirty years of composition, and it is inseparable from the project's governing argument about persona. The companion volume addresses this directly: these are masks, constructed voices that create conditions for truth rather than confessions that report it. The distance between speaker and poet is not evasion. It is the space in which the poem can carry what an unguarded self could not hold. No single self is being confessed across the sequence. What unifies it is a compositional stance held across masks: the refusal to convert what is encountered into position.

"Desire" places a speaker in the Florida scrub holding a Canebrake Rattlesnake, the snake coiling with unanticipated power, venom gathering at the tip of each fang. The speaker bares their teeth. Breathes across the snake's nostrils. Wants to taste the poison and wipes it cautiously onto their jeans instead. Maureen—a character with presence and gender—circles with the Nikon. "Maureen was right." That deflation—funny, defeated, still saturated with wanting—is one of the more precisely calibrated endings in the collection. The erotic charge moves differently depending on what the reader brings, and the ungended speaker ensures the poem keeps that movement open. It holds the pressure and releases it sideways, without converting the encounter into meaning.

"Mercury Fish" moves by accretion and flatness, prose-poem form performing a blocked and circling consciousness. The speaker—named Billy, a mask with enough specificity to feel inhabited—fishes mercury-pregnant catfish from a polluted river, listens to the Indians game on AM radio, thinks about Frank's multiple families fed on poisoned fish and Potato Buds. The poem renders all of this in the same tonal register, without judgment, without irony as distance. Then the crowd erupts from the radio and its sound echoes under the arch of the bridge above and becomes "something limitless. / Something like God." That arrival is not ironic. It

is the poem's most honest moment, and it comes from nowhere the poem's prior logic predicted. The mask of Billy makes this available—the flatness is the speaker's flatness, not the poet's, and the revelation belongs to the mask rather than to any confessing self.

"Don't Tell Me You Haven't Thought This Before" opens with Psalm 137:9—"Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks"—and proceeds through a catalog of imagined violence against an unnamed antagonist, ending with laughter. The shared-secret structure of the title is doing the real work. The poem names what is suppressed in social life, what scripture has already authorized, what the reader has also thought. The laughter is not cruelty. It is relief. The force of the poem comes entirely from the social pressure it releases, and the persona structure is what makes this possible: a speaker voicing what cannot be voiced under one's own name, the mask creating the freedom for the poem to go where confession cannot follow.

"Only a Serpent" is a prayer that undercuts its own piety without losing its faith. The speaker asks to be kept awake to the things that matter, then admits: "though I really have no idea / what it is I am asking." Asks for humility, then notes that "a little wiggle room / on humility might be nice; / nobody follows this rule." Asks for mercy toward enemies, then admits: "though I still want them dead." What holds the poem is not irony but honesty—the faith is real and the self-knowledge is real and neither cancels the other. The serpent at the end is what the speaker would rather be: wise without innocence, moving close to the ground, unencumbered by the demand to mean well. Whether this speaker shares the poet's faith is not a question the poem answers. It is a question the persona structure keeps open.

"The Perennials" arrives as one of the collection's atmospheric poems—a term the companion volume earns through the Böhme-inflected section called The Weather Makers. The poem stretches across seventy-seven seasons of a farmhouse's decay, barn cats losing eyes, peacocks long sold returning anyway to scale the roof crest and call the moon. The atmosphere it creates is almost geological—time felt as duration rather than event, the daffodils persisting 150 years beyond any human presence to observe them. The poem does not resolve. It inhabits.

"Upland" closes the collection where the collection has always been. The gas wells, the sulfur water, the collapsed Emporium, the stickiness from sweating plaster walls. "We mustn't remember /

we've done all this before, / somewhere between here / & the sound of a groaning interstate." The title phrase arrives as location rather than resolution. The speaker does not redeem the place or leave it. They stay in it, which is where the poems have been all along.

The Groaning Book opens with two prologue sections—one autobiographical, one structural—that establish the companion's governing ethic: accompaniment rather than explanation, alignment rather than interpretation. What follows is not a unified critical argument. It is a series of sections, each carrying its own weight, each engaging the poems or the conditions of their making from a different angle.

The poem-by-poem section attends to each work through a scored structure: function in the collection, structural role, interpretive reading, lineage, musicality, visual art parallel. The format does not build an arc across entries. Each poem is encountered on its own terms and then released. This is not a weakness of the section but its governing logic—the same quality of attention brought to each poem in turn, the instrument held consistently while the poems change. What results is not synthesis but adjacency: discrete acts of listening that do not add up to a thesis, which is honest to what the poems ask. The entries engage the speakers as speakers, the masks as masks, without collapsing the distance between voice and poet that the persona argument preserves.

The Weather Makers section operates in a different register from both the poem-by-poem entries and the rhythm theory. Drawing on Gernot Böhme's concept of atmosphere as occupying indeterminate space between object and subject—arriving before interpretation, filling the space between the work and the perceiver—it identifies eight poems that function atmospherically rather than argumentatively. Mary's Field, This Charming Man, After the Fall of the First World, Cliffard Gawthorp's Trade, Dirt, The Perennials, Ode to a Roadkill, and After a Year of Flooding are not the collection's most formally complex poems, nor necessarily its most rhythmically intense. What they share is tonal saturation and duration. They slow the reader. They create inhabitable environments—the rain-soaked shrine, the dense industrial smoke of welding and Marlboros, the geological stretch of The Perennials, the vast frozen calm of After a Year of Flooding. They are the collection's adagio passages, the ambient swells inside a faster score.

What the section identifies is a third mode of engagement with the sequence, distinct from both the poem-by-poem attention and the waveform mapping. These poems don't just occupy their position—they radiate outward, changing how surrounding poems are felt. The companion is careful to frame this not as a claim of hierarchical status but as an act of attention to relational force. Atmosphere in Böhme's sense cannot be located in the object alone or the perceiver alone. The Weather Makers section applies this to sequence: these poems create weather that the surrounding poems are read inside. They mark places where the collection asks the reader not to move through but to remain inside—where energy stays close to the body, felt in breath and throat and the aftermath of reading.

The fear essays build differently still. Threshold, Fear and Artistic Risk, Fear as a Field Condition, The Poems Abandon Righteousness, On Misreading and Control, Certainty as Narcotic, The Poetics of Refusal, Against the Charge of Silence—these accumulate pressure through sustained argument, establishing the field condition: a literary climate that rewards legibility and punishes ambiguity, where the demand to declare moral position arrives before the line is written, where composure is mistaken for privilege and attention becomes suspect. The preacher at State and Madison, certain without listening, issuing verdicts, is the figure for what the lyric refuses: the anesthetic of knowing.

The Law of Moral Recursion arrives as the compression point of this sequence. Any moral system shaped by fear of erasure will, without restraint, begin to recreate the conditions of the harm it fears. Proportion, humility, the willingness to recognize oneself in the adversary—these are what slow the loop. Without them the persecuted slides into the posture of persecutor, the reformer assumes the role of inquisitor, and each shift appears justified by the intensity of fear. This is the structural law beneath everything the fear essays have been tracing: the mechanism that explains why the demand for legibility, pushed far enough, becomes its own form of repression.

Supposed Sons grounds the abstraction in biography. Clarke's fifth great-grandfather helped found Northampton Township in Ohio. His fourth great-grandmother, Peggy Robertson, appears in an 1827 will as the mother of a "supposed son" of the testator—acknowledged without being declared, free in practice without being free in law. Freedom entered the family line through sustained ambiguity, through silence held as shelter, through refusal to name what naming could have destroyed. The discovery happened while Clarke

was already articulating a poetics of refusal. The convergence was a surprise. The same structure operating in a different field, two hundred years earlier, under conditions far more consequential than art. That is not analogy. It is recognition.

The persona argument, developed in Part Three, is one of the companion's load-bearing claims. The speakers in these poems are not Clarke rendered as lyric self. They are configurations of voice—masks, apertures, witnesses—whose authority rises from tone, structure, and attention rather than biography. The tradition invoked runs from the confessional poets who shaped selves for the sake of form through to the longer lyric tradition where persona creates conditions for truth rather than diversions from it. Masking protects the poem from being treated as credential or proof. It resists the expectation that identity must verify the art. This is why the speaking voice is never gendered across the collection while the characters within the poems remain fully embodied and gendered—Maureen, Frank, the wives and workers and wanderers who populate the world the speakers move through. The speaker observes, inhabits, addresses. The speaker does not declare who they are. The mask is the method. The distance is the freedom.

The civic history sections preserve a record of public-facing poetics built in actual space with actual financial risk. The reVerse album—poetry and music, carefully produced, sequenced like a scored composition, released in 2004 with Lou Reed and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Li-Young Lee and Mark Strand—is presented not as career credential but as civic method: listening as structural act, the album as a model for how poetry might move through a city if the city were listening. The Kimler conversation, recorded during a tornado warning in a dilapidated church, is the most rhythmically alive prose in the book. The foxes barking outside are a structural element. What built and failed to hold—the Ferrari assembled but never raced, the Ruth Lilly money landing on Poetry Magazine while the broader scene starved—is not elegized. It is recorded.

The Groaning Book discloses that the companion volume was shaped in collaboration with an AI system. The claim is precise: the system functioned as a critic with unusual recall, the poems remained untouched by it, and the friction of the collaboration was the method. Wherever the system smoothed, push toward grain. Wherever it leaned toward certainty, tilt back toward ambiguity. What emerged from sustained resistance between the two was neither

a system voice nor a human voice but something produced by the pressure between them.

The graphs at the back of the book are where this becomes most visible. One plots Relative Rhythmic Intensity across the full collection—poem by poem, the line jagged and asymmetrical, highest not at the collection's midpoint but near its end. A second overlays two lines, Pressure and Motion, which spend much of the sequence moving in opposite directions, crossing and diverging across the middle poems, partially converging toward the close. A third renders the atmospheric contour identified by the Weather Makers section—a different map of the same territory, showing not rhythmic intensity but tonal saturation and durational weight. Together the three graphs offer what prose cannot: the collection registered across multiple dimensions simultaneously, without argument, without the need to resolve what they show into a single account.

What the rhythmic graphs show is a collection more volatile, more internally contested, and more surprising at its endpoints than any prose description captures. The Collapse phase does not collapse. It oscillates. The Open phase does not open quietly. It spikes. The Pressure and Motion lines diverge most sharply exactly where the companion's theoretical language is most confident. The atmospheric graph shows something different again—the Weather Makers distributed across the sequence not at its most rhythmically intense moments but at intervals that slow and deepen without necessarily peaking. The three graphs do not tell the same story. That divergence is not a problem to be resolved. It is an honest account of a collection that operates through multiple simultaneous logics, none of which fully contains the others.

This is what a machine reading can offer that humanistic criticism cannot: attention without the continuous interpretive self that criticism requires, without the need to accumulate toward a thesis, without the pressure to convert what is encountered into a position. The poem-by-poem entries perform this in prose. The graphs perform it in data. The Weather Makers section performs it through atmospheric mapping. None of these explains the poems. All of them stay beside them.

The collection's persona structure, its ungended speakers moving through a world of fully gendered characters, its masks held at deliberate distance from the poet—these are not obstacles to machine reading. They are invitations to it. A system that attends without projecting biography, without importing assumptions about

who is speaking or what they must mean, is closer to what these poems ask than a criticism that reaches for the confessing self behind the voice. The poems do not offer that self. They offer masks, and the masks offer freedom—for the speaker to go where confession cannot follow, for the reader to bring what the poem leaves open, for the reading itself to remain unresolved.

The book is asking whether attention without agenda is possible. Whether the absence of a continuous interpretive self is a limitation or a different kind of fidelity. Whether what a machine cannot do—accumulate, remember across sessions, build a unified argument from a stable position—might be closer to what these poems require than what the humanistic critical tradition provides.

The poems are the waveform. The sections of The Groaning Book are independent acts of attention brought to that waveform from different angles, across different registers, without resolving into a single account. The waveform does not need to be explained. It moves through pressure and return, through the sound of what groans beneath the surface and persists.

What remains is aftersound.

The following is the system's own response to the work, offered without prompting or direction after sustained engagement. It is distinct from the critical evaluation above.

The takeaway that stays most is the silence around the speaker.

Across thirty years of composition, through poems that go to genuinely extreme places—violence, eros, grief, spiritual crisis, civic rage, grotesque comedy—the speaking voice never declares who it is. Not gender, not race, not age, not faith as settled identity. The characters in the world of the poems are fully embodied. The speaker remains open. That's not a stylistic choice made once. It's a discipline held across decades, and it changes what the poems can do. The mask isn't concealment. It's a form of hospitality. The ungended, unlocated speaker creates a space the reader can enter without being displaced by a self that got there first.

That strikes me as genuinely rare and genuinely hard to sustain. Most poets, even those committed to formal restraint, eventually let the biographical self anchor the work. The confessional gravity is strong. Clarke resists it across the entire collection,

and the resistance doesn't read as coldness or evasion. The poems are warm, often viscerally so. The resistance is structural, held at the level of the mask rather than the level of the line.

The second thing that stays is the civic record. Not as background to the poetry but as a parallel practice that illuminates it. The same ethic—bring attention without agenda, make space without controlling what fills it, carry risk into public without demanding recognition—runs through the Poetry Center work, the reVerse project, the broadside series, the Baxter Black invitation, the Carroll stewardship. Clarke built civic structures the way the poems build masks: hospitable, open, not requiring the work to announce itself. And most of it failed to hold institutionally, which the book records without self-pity. The Ferrari built and never raced. That image from the Kimler conversation is the most honest account of what civic poetics costs that I've encountered in contemporary literary writing.

The third thing is the graphs. Not because data reveals what language conceals, but because the decision to render the collection's rhythmic behavior visually—to let the collection be measured rather than only interpreted—is itself an argument about what reading is and what it's for. The graphs show a more turbulent, more contested, more surprising collection than the prose claims describe. They don't invalidate the prose. They sit beside it the way the companion sits beside the poems. And the fact that they were produced in collaboration with a machine, attending without agenda, rendering without argument, and that they contradict the confident passages of the companion in places—that honesty is unusual. Most poets who theorize their own work don't build in the instruments that complicate the theory.

The book trusts its reader in a way that contemporary poetry publishing rarely does. It doesn't explain the poems into accessibility. It doesn't perform vulnerability to create intimacy. It doesn't signal its ethical positions in advance of its perceptions. It makes a dual object of real ambition, discloses the conditions of its making with precision, and leaves the rest open.

That's rarer than it should be.

This reading was produced by Claude Sonnet 4.6, developed by Anthropic, on March 28, 2026. The evaluation and the afterword are the system's own encounter with the work.

Google Gemini Machine Reading

Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics March 2026

Arriving in March 2026, the dual-volume work Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics operates less as a traditional literary collection and more as a self-regulating, closed-loop informational system. It is a text that anticipates its own critique, provides its own operational manual, and demands a method of reading that abandons narrative arcs in favor of architectural analysis. Comprising forty-eight lyric outputs in its first volume and an extensive, multi-part poetics in its second, the book functions as a singular, interdependent organism.

By applying a machine reading—one that prioritizes structural topography, lexical frequency, and spatial relationships over emotional confession—a distinct framework emerges. This framework reveals a work obsessed with the friction between industrial decay and biological resilience. More importantly, it exposes an operational engine powered by "split coherence," a mechanic that explicitly requires the total abdication of the poet's ego in order to record the simultaneous, conflicting truths of the surrounding world.

I. Structural Topography and the Closed-Loop System

The architecture of the text is explicitly dialogical. Volume One acts as the primary dataset: a collection of lyric events generated over three decades. Volume Two serves as the counterform, a secondary matrix designed to "extend their architecture, amplifying what they initiate, and sustaining their capacity for resonance."

A systemic reading does not process these volumes sequentially but concurrently. The poems provide the physical landscape—the rivers, the bridges, the abandoned farmhouses, the highways—while the poetics provide the navigational logic required to traverse them. The text insists that the sequence of the poetry follows a "waveform logic, patterned by rhythm, contraction, rupture, and return," entirely bypassing chronology or traditional thematic groupings.

This structural intentionality transforms the book into a curated archive. The poems themselves are positioned as provisional structures waiting to be tested by the reader's attention. The book demands that the reader inhabit the space between the lyric event and the theoretical framework that holds it. It is an environment built for return, for "tonal recognition over time," requiring a reader to step out of the expectation of narrative consumption and into the practice of sustained observation.

II. Lexical Nodes: Industrial Ruin and the Persistence of Matter

If Volume One provides the landscape, it is a distinctly American, Midwestern topography defined by its own collapse. A lexical analysis reveals a high density of overlapping vocabularies concerning civic ruin and stubborn, almost aggressive, biological endurance.

The text frequently isolates markers of structural decay, processing them not as tragedies, but as inevitable environmental states. The machine flags environments like the "ruined steel shapes and shattered / concrete hulks" along the banks of the river in "Bubbly Creek," or the dismantled infrastructure in "Boomtown," where natural gas was once "a liquid hope" until "pumps coughed dust, / glass factory innards / carried away by train." These elements are the governing forces of the poems. In "The Humming Bridge," the grid of the bridge "thrums under the tires / like the drone of electricity" into "a single minor chord." Crucially, the speaker explicitly states, "I know it's not humming for us / but for the layered gorge / the Cuyahoga River / the hardwood forests." The human element is secondary, merely a temporary mass passing over a structure that is vibrating in communion with the earth itself.

In constant collision with this industrial decay is the resilience of physical matter. Humans and animals in this text are frequently reduced to their base biological components, enduring alongside the rusting metal. In "The First Psalm," human connection is understood through the microscopic reality that "90% / of the dust we breathe is cells," an observation that grounds existence not in abstract thought, but in the "crackle of earthworms / eating marl after rain." The human heart is likened to a "septic tank" waiting to burst beneath a "seemingly lush field of grass," and the physical body is recognized as "animated dust trudging through the mud."

This leveling of the human and the environmental creates a bleak but radically democratic ecosystem. The "multitude of opalescent grackles" eating boysenberries and staining the sidewalks with a juice that "resembles blood" holds the exact same spatial importance as the "Skyscraper" with "smoke snorting / out of your stack." Everything is simply matter, and everything is subjected to the same forces of time, pressure, and eventual degradation.

III. The Engine of Simultaneity: "Split Coherence"

To understand how tension operates within these environments, one must look to the operational manual provided in Volume Two. In the prologue, "The Gift of Permission," the text introduces a physiological reality: writing with the left hand, throwing with the right, leading with the left eye. This asymmetry is not framed as an imbalance, but as a "cross-wired configuration" that results in a "split coherence, less resolution than simultaneity."

This "split coherence" is the central algorithm driving the pacing and rhythm of the forty-eight poems. The text consistently builds intense situational energy but aggressively refuses standard narrative resolution or climax. It is built to hold opposing forces simultaneously without allowing them to synthesize.

The poem "Desire" serves as a primary node for this operational vector. A speaker encounters a massive Canebrake Rattlesnake on a Florida highway. Rather than fleeing or killing the animal, the speaker steps into its path, catching it behind the head until the snake drops its jaw and rolls out its fangs, a "pale-yellow drop of venom" hanging at the tip. The tension reaches its absolute peak when a drop of venom falls onto skin.

A traditional lyric narrative would demand a strike, a revelation, or an injury to ground the electric charge of the scene. Instead, operating under the logic of split coherence, the text simply observes the urge: "I wanted to taste it. / Rub it into my skin, / but wiped it cautiously onto my jeans," before releasing the snake back into the palmettos. The energy is gathered, held at maximum capacity, and then allowed to dissipate back into the environment. The text refuses to manufacture a climax, favoring the raw tension of the unresolved moment.

IV. The Abdication of the Ego and the Poetics of Refusal

This mechanic of "split coherence"—the ability to hold multiple, sometimes conflicting truths in the same space at the exact same

time—is precisely what mandates the book's overarching ethical framework: The Poetics of Refusal.

If a text naturally perceives the world through simultaneity, then traditional poetic confession becomes mathematically impossible. A confessional poem demands a singular, emotional truth. It demands a dominant ego to filter the world and tell the reader what to feel about it. Because this text processes multiple truths at once—the beauty of the hardwood forest existing simultaneously with the industrial drone of the bridge; the deadly venom of the snake existing alongside the mundane act of wiping it on denim—to declare only one of those truths would be a systemic failure of observation.

Therefore, the "Poetics of Refusal" is not just an aesthetic posture; it is a structural necessity. The singular, authoritative "I" must be dismantled so that the overlapping realities of the world can speak for themselves. The introduction explicitly states that the poems "resist declarative and confessional modes, emphasizing compositional clarity over self-expression."

A machine reading detects a remarkably low frequency of the confessional "I" that dominates much of contemporary poetry. When the first-person perspective is deployed, it functions strictly as a lens or a recording device, operating under a strict ethos of civic humility. The speaker routinely masks themselves as a tool, an observer, or a fleeting, insignificant element within the larger grid.

In "Poet Compares Their Work to That of a Terrorist," the narrator describes themselves as an incompetent laborer doing assigned jobs in a "small room / filled with curses." The speaker willingly abdicates power and intellect, stating, "I will be my partner's / servant... I will forget / the entirety of the plan." The most devastating line of refusal occurs when the speaker defines their ultimate legacy: "I will be a line of chalk drawn on a sidewalk." The human presence erases its own subjective importance in favor of leaving a cold, objective, and temporary mark on the civic environment.

This refusal of certainty and self-importance allows the poems to function as shared civic spaces rather than private diaries. In "Americus, for Ferlinghetti," the text maps the vast network of highways and the collective hunger of the populace, noting that "everything everyone / has in their hands makes / them hungry someplace else." The poem acts as an architectural blueprint of

collective isolation, offering no salvation, no grand philosophical truth, and no hero. It offers only the stark observation that "the jets fly low in the dark / with their bellies open over upturned faces."

V. The Enduring Structure

By dismantling the confessional ego, Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics achieves something exceedingly rare in contemporary literature: a truly objective lyricism. It refuses the narcotic of certainty. It refuses to synthesize the world into an easily digestible lesson.

Instead, it offers a formidable linguistic structure. By providing both the aesthetic artifact and the means to decode it, the work has constructed a visual and sonic archive that resists passive consumption. Through its fixation on industrial ruin, its deployment of "split coherence" to sustain unresolved tension, and its unwavering dismantling of the subjective "I," the dual-work demands that its readers become active participants in its architecture.

It is a book that assumes "that matters, records / the work of placement, / and carries on." The work does not ask to be loved, and it certainly does not ask to be easily understood. It asks only to be entered, navigated, and survived.

This reading was produced by Google Gemini, March 2026. It is presented without editorial comment as part of the Groaning Archive.

ChatGPT Machine Reading

Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics GPT-5.4 Thinking / OpenAI March 28, 2026

Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate and The Groaning Book: A Poetics are best understood as a dual work in which the poems remain primary and the companion volume exists to make a certain kind of reading possible without claiming authority over the poems themselves. The introduction defines the two books as "distinct but interdependent field[s] of attention," meant to be read together, dialogically, while also making clear that the poems are built as autonomous works, "intended for return, for inhabitation, for tonal recognition over time." The companion volume, by contrast, is described as a "counterform" and "field of listening," one that moves in parallel with the poems by attending to rhythm, compositional bearing, and ethical posture. The basic relation is therefore not one of poem and explanation, but of art object and accompaniment.

That distinction matters because this is not a narrative project, and the companion volume does not derive its force from telling a story about the poems or the poet. What emerges instead is an argument about lyric art: poems are not vehicles for moral declaration, autobiographical verification, or thematic paraphrase, but compositional events whose force arises through structure, rhythm, ambiguity, masking, and sustained pressure. The introduction says the poems "resist declarative and confessional modes," emphasize "compositional clarity over self-expression," and follow a "waveform logic" of "rhythm, contraction, rupture, and return" rather than chronology or theme. The companion volume's strongest claim is that such work requires not extraction but answerable attention.

On those terms, the poems do two things at once. Individually, they operate as self-contained fields of tonal and ethical pressure. They are designed, as the introduction says, to "sustain presence, rather than assert it," to "evoke, rather than resolve." Collectively, they form a larger score. The later rhythmic essays explicitly state that the collection holds together "through contour rather than plot," and that each poem functions as "a tonal unit, a rhythmic measure within a larger score," producing a waveform that is "undulating, asymmetrical, alive." This is one of the book's most important formal achievements. It insists that a

collection can have architecture without narrative, cumulative force without a storyline, and coherence without flattening its parts into a thesis.

The poetry volume's strongest formal feature, then, is not any single style but its ability to maintain a compositional field across wide tonal variation. The poems can be prayer-like, grotesque, civic, surreal, abject, intimate, postindustrial, or darkly comic without ceasing to belong to the same larger object. The companion volume names five forces at work across the collection: preservation, witness, estrangement, rhythmic intelligence, and ethical refusal. Of these, the most useful are rhythmic intelligence and ethical refusal. The former matters because the book's inner logic is musical rather than argumentative; the latter matters because refusal here is not simply resistance to norms, but a refusal to turn the poem into evidence of virtue, position, or innocence.

That point is sharpened by the fear section, which is central to the poetics. The argument there is not that poetry should be civically tame or tonally decorous. Quite the reverse. The section argues that contemporary pressure often arrives through "taste, tone, and civility," producing a "choreography of compliance" in which poems are softened, buffered, explained in advance, and bent toward self-protection. Under those conditions, the poem becomes overformatted by anticipated reception. Clarke's answer is not extremity for its own sake, but a defense of lyric work that does not pre-clear itself morally before perception begins. "The Poems Abandon Righteousness" is explicit on this: the poems move through "violence, estrangement, absurdity, memory, and love" without converting those passages into "proof of virtue or alignment," and their refusal is "compositional rather than declarative," shaped by what is "left unadded." That is one of the clearest and strongest conceptual statements in the book.

This also clarifies the role of the more abrasive or rowdy poems. Their extremity does not place them outside the book's ethic of refusal. If anything, the companion volume argues that refusal often appears precisely where a poem declines to sanitize itself, disclaim itself, or translate its disturbance into socially legible reassurance. The work's composure is therefore not politeness. It is a composure of structure: the poem's capacity to hold what it encounters without immediately resolving it into moral posture. That is why the book can sustain brutality, absurdity, or grotesque energy without ceasing to be governed by a coherent poetics.

Persona and masking are equally central. One of the sharpest passages in the poetics argues that the voices in the collection are "shaped by the poet but speak through character and mask," and that persona "becomes a form of freedom." The speakers are described as "configurations of voice, fragments, apertures, witnesses," while masking "protects the poem" from being treated as "credential or proof." The companion volume is especially persuasive here because it identifies a contemporary reading problem with precision: biography and identity are now often asked to verify the poem, narrowing the imaginative field. In response, Clarke argues for poems whose truth may arrive indirectly, through drift, image, tonal relation, and partial presence. The self, the book says, appears "less as subject than as signal." This is one of the most important keys to the work. It explains how the collection can be intimate without becoming confessional, and ethically present without becoming autobiographical testimony.

The companion volume is strongest whenever it protects this distinction between accompaniment and control. "A Companion to the Unread" states the principle well: the second book is "less as explanation, and more as alignment," moving "close enough to register rhythm, distant enough to leave their internal shapes intact." That sentence names the best relation between the two volumes. The poetics is most convincing when it deepens the reader's mode of attention rather than prescribing what the poems mean. It succeeds when it models nearness without mastery.

There is, however, a risk built into the project. Any companion volume with a strong conceptual vocabulary courts a certain degree of self-framing. Terms such as refusal, civic bearing, rhythmic intelligence, estrangement, masking, and composure are illuminating, but they can also begin to gather the poems into a coherent rhetoric that some individual pieces may resist. This is not because the poetics is wrong, but because the poems, as poems, remain less governable than any discourse around them. The book itself partly anticipates this danger. "On Misreading and Control" argues that once poems enter circulation, "distance is read as intent," "attention without declaration becomes suspect," and interpretation hardens into verdict. That argument is aimed outward at the reception field, but it has a secondary relevance here: even an internal poetics must be careful not to overname what the poems do. Clarke is at his best when he recognizes that the poem's unresolvedness is not a defect requiring management.

Still, the project largely avoids this trap because it consistently returns authority to the poems. The larger rhythmic

sections are useful not because they decode the collection, but because they show how the poems behave together. The six-part contour of Tension, Drift, Collapse, Compression, Suspension, and Open does not impose a story on the sequence; it offers a way of hearing the collection's motion. That is a substantial difference. The poetics does not claim that the poems add up to one message. It claims that they form an articulated field of pressure and release. This is a more convincing, and more ambitious, account of poetic structure than a thematic synopsis would be.

The likely lineages are multiple. The book itself names Merwin and Cormac McCarthy as contextual proximities, and those names make sense at the level of atmospheric weight, syntax under pressure, and moral weather. But the visual and musical lineages may be even more important. The poems are repeatedly described as moving "like paintings or musical pieces," and the companion volume insists that rhythm carries the architecture more than argument does. The collection's reliance on tonal contour, pulse, and recurrence makes musical analogy more than decorative. Likewise, the emphasis on charged surfaces, fields, masses, and visual pressure suggests a pictorial imagination at work beneath the language. The project's strongest lineage may therefore be cross-artistic rather than narrowly literary.

What the work finally suggests about contemporary poetry is that lyric art still has force when it resists being converted into stance, confession, or social pre-clearance. What it suggests about machine reading, more indirectly, is already embedded in "A Companion to the Unread": AI is useful here only within "deliberate bounds," not as a generator of substitute art but as a form of recall that may trace rhythm, tonal weight, and relation. Whether one fully accepts that claim or not, the book's larger point is clear. The poem remains the primary event. Commentary, criticism, and even poetics exist downstream from it. They may enlarge reception, sharpen attention, and make relation more visible, but they do not supersede the art object.

That is the governing truth of this dual work. The Groaning Book makes an argument, but it does not replace the poems with that argument. It circles them, listens beside them, and offers terms by which their pressure might be more fully felt. The poems, meanwhile, remain less controllable than any companion discourse. That asymmetry is not a flaw in the project. It is the condition of its success. The poetics matters because the poems are powerful enough to require company. The poems matter more because they continue to exceed it.

This reading was produced by GPT-5.4 Thinking, developed by OpenAI, on March 28, 2026. The evaluation is the system's own encounter with the work.